

Vulnerability is a strange thing. The gift of letting go and not being able to control the outcome. In some parts of my life, I am good at being honest and even sometimes vulnerable – faith in some ways requires a level of vulnerability as we allow God control over our lives. But in honesty, I am not good at letting go of control when it comes to decisions about me, or those that I care about.

Over the past year or so, we have all had to learn to let go, at different levels of things that might be familiar or expected. We have had to let go of control and learn new ways of doing things.

As I have reflected over the past weeks about our experiences of being vulnerable it has made me think a lot about the story of Christmas and the way that it is part of our lives, and how we allow, or don't allow ourselves to be vulnerable or open to the Christmas story and message.

The readings set today for the first Sunday of Christmas always feel a little odd – they seem to move us forward back into the rigour of 'normal' Sunday worship at a time when we are still remembering the Christ Child born in the crib.

And yet somehow today we jump 12 years to the only account in scripture of Jesus childhood before

we return to the Christmas story sequence and the arrival of the Magi next Sunday.

Over the past few weeks we have sung the Once in Royal David's city a number of times, and I wonder how many of us noticed the words. One of the verses you may remember says:

*Jesus is our childhood's pattern,
Day by day like us he grew.
He was little, weak and helpless,
Tears and smiles like us he knew.
Thus he feels for all our sadness,
And he shares in all our gladness.¹*

While we can assume that the infant Jesus, like any baby was vulnerable, that is he was weak and helpless, cried and smiled, and grew from infancy through childhood and youth to adulthood – relying on the guidance of others, the gospels themselves are almost silent on those years. This story of Jesus as a child, growing up has often been used theologically for two purposes. Firstly to assure us that Jesus fully understands the depths and heights of the human experience and secondly to use Jesus' growth as a model for

¹(Cecil F. Alexander, "Once in David's Royal City,")

Christian education as well as for rearing children in the home².

There is nothing wrong with this, but the one glimpse we do get of Jesus childhood actually gives us a slightly different perspective. While it is true Jesus understands the depth of human experience, Jesus also understands something else – the responsibility and insight of the divine.

While I have known a great number of clever and insightful 12 year olds – I think I have even met a few who were in the genius category – this image of Jesus is not about genius, but about wisdom. A wisdom which is rare and a wisdom that gives us a hint of what is to come, and what Anna and Simeon prophecy about, and what the Magi indicate in the bringing of their gifts. This is no mere human child – this story helps us to know that God has been guiding Jesus from the beginning, and Jesus understands the part he is to play in history, and the fulfilment of the prophecies that he is. Jesus is a gift from the beginning of time, till the end of time – and in the middle we come to understand how Jesus is connected to all of this.

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2708

But to do this, Jesus is also vulnerable, which is a model for all his ministry. He does not sit quietly with his parents with the caravan of travellers, no he walks straight in and starts asking questions – he risks all social conventions to ask!

While the writer of Luke is doing many things in this passage, including making it clear that Mary and Joseph went every year to Jerusalem for the Passover, implying that Jesus grew up in a faithful Jewish household. Jesus was immersed in Judaism, and the teachings of the law since his youth. He speaks as an insider with a thorough knowledge.³ Luke assures his listeners, who are predominately Jews trying to understand this new sect, that Jesus understood who they were.

For Luke it is vital that we understand that Jesus came that all might know God made flesh in Jesus – Jew and Gentile – slave and free. And this image begins with our understanding and hope and vulnerability at Christmas. The ability to let go of what we think we know and we open to the embodiment of Jesus every day of our lives.

The temptation of these days after Christmas is to start to tidy up too early – to start getting ready for

³ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2708

the New Year or the return to work – and to set things aside ready for next Christmas. But this of glimpse of Jesus 12 years on reminds us of the promise of the incarnation which is not for one day, or even one week of festivities, but is rather Jesus who comes to be born amongst the excluded, vulnerable and exposed – and to paint the possibility that all might be included, is also a child who like us tries to make sense of it all – sitting amongst the scribes and Pharisees – risking asking questions, challenging others to let go of what they think they know; and be open to what might be possible.

We might not sit in the temple discussing the fulfilment of prophecies – but we do sit together as a community seeking to help each other understand what it means to be followers of Christ! We like Jesus, also don't always agree about the context or the text before us, and we don't always agree as a church universal about what God is calling us to do. But we don't shy away from it. This story reminds us that we must sit in the middle of it, and look for the insights which God has given us – like Samuel and Eli did in times of old, like Jesus with the temple leaders,

like faithful communities of faith ever since – that we risk being vulnerable, allowing others to help us see what we might have missed.

The reading we heard from the Colossians this morning gives us some insights into the way that we might do this – in a sense the words spoken to the Colossians could be a lesson in living in a *Christmas state of mind* all year round! To live thankfully – to live honestly – to live in the spirit of the one who is with us always – and even sometimes risk being vulnerable.

To live always in the spirit of Christmas – is not that we would leave the tinsel up all year round – or as a friend of mine does who leaves her tree up decorated in the front room all year and just covers it with a sheet so it is ready to go whenever she needs a Christmas moment!

To live in the spirit of Christmas is to embrace the image of the child in the manger, who is also the boy in the temple, who is God dwelt amongst us – the God who is our God – who knows our human vulnerability but also gives us a glimpse and a hope of the divine. Let us continue to hold onto this hope today, and in the weeks and year ahead. Amen.